

courage, dear heart by emmaofmisthaven

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Summary:

The first time Mike is back home from college, it's Thanksgiving and he feels like his skin is two sizes too small for his body.

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

Those children own my ass, and I usually hate children

The first time Mike is back home from college, it's Thanksgiving and he feels like his skin is two sizes too small for his body. Dustin and he decides to drive together, all the way from MIT, and they're good at spending the entire ride speaking about everything but the fact that Lucas won't be here because he enrolled into the army straight out of high school, or that Will couldn't afford the journey from Parsons. (Mike is the only one who knows Will doesn't want to go home because he now has a boyfriend, and doesn't want to tell his mother.) (As if Mrs Byers would reject him for that.) They're also good at not talking about the fact that it's been six years and a few days. They're really good at not talking about that.

Thanksgiving dinner is as eventful as they go – Mike's mother pretends to understand when he explains what he is studying, and his father doesn't bother pretending he even listens. Mike shares exasperated smiles with Nancy, who rolls her eyes at appropriated times, just as done with their family as he is. There is fondness in the curve of her lips, though, something Mike relates to – even on different sides of the country now, they still call each other once a week, at least. Sometimes, Mike believes she's the only one who understands – she's the only one who lost someone to the Upside Down, too.

Nancy brought Jonathan for the second year in a row – last year was 'just friends' all over again, this year's tune has finally changed. His sister looks happy, and Mike doesn't know what to make of this. He is happy for her, of course, but a little jealous too of the way she holds her boyfriend's hand under the table, and their silent conversations in just a glance. This isn't fair, Mike thinks bitterly, before stopping his thoughts there – it never does well, to dwell a little too much on those memories.

Their mother is telling them the latest town gossips – which neither

Mike nor Nancy care about – when the phone starts ringing, startling them all. His mother sighs heavily, loudly, before she abandons her story and her forkful of mashed potatoes to stand up and pick the phone. Nancy mouths something Mike can't quite make out, but he grins anyway at her frustrated look, and she smirks a little in reply. He makes a face at her.

“Oh hello, Joyce,” his mother says into the phone, effectively managing to get the siblings’ attention, as well as Jonathan’s. They all stare at her, waiting. “Do you want to talk to Jonathan? ...Oh. Okay then.” She covers the phone’s transmitter with her hand, before she calls out, “Mike, it’s for you.”

Mike stares at Nancy, who stares back with her eyebrows raised, just as surprised as he feels. Dread settles in his stomach, the way it’s been doing for the past six years every time something out of the ordinary happens. He wishes it would go away, but it just doesn’t – neither do the nightmares, even if they’re few and far between now. He still wakes up in a cold sweat once a month, calling Nancy or Will, or sometimes even Hopper. Mostly Nancy.

Mike swallows around the knot in his throat as he stands up and goes to stand next to his mother in front of the phone, taking it from her before he slowly puts it to his ear. He closes his eyes, and takes a deep breath.

“Hi, Mrs Byers.”

“Oh, Michael.” Her voice is frantic, the way it’s always been. According to Jonathan, she’s been doing better, ever since Hopper moved in with them. Mike believes they will never be truly okay – they can’t, after everything that happened.

“Is Will okay?” he asks, because he has to ask. Will stopped vomiting slugs five years ago, but the Upside Down is still in his mind. Will is the least okay of them all.

“Yes, yes,” Mrs Byers replies, hurried. “Can you come to my home, please?”

Mike stammers on the word, “W-Why?”

“Please, just come.”

And then she hangs up, leaving Mike to listen to the dial tone of his phone for long seconds. Nancy must notice his widening eyes, or the vacant expression on his face, because she is next to him in a second, asking what’s going on. He explains in so many words, and it takes longer arguing with their parents about leaving in the middle of Thanksgiving dinner than it does for the three of them to sit in Jonathan’s old car as he turns the engine on. Mike doesn’t even argue the fact that they are both coming with him – he would do the same thing, in their place.

The ride takes only a few minutes, and then Mike finds himself knocking on Mrs Byers’ door, like he is fourteen all over again and showing up for a round of Dungeons and Dragons at Will’s, or like they’re going to spend the afternoon listening to music and not doing anything. Only today doesn’t feel cheery, and his heart weights like lead where it dropped in his stomach. Mrs Byers opens the door almost immediately, just enough to show her face but not enough for Mike to witness what is going on inside. He prays for not another monster, or Christmas lights everywhere – please, let it not be another monster.

“Thank God you’re here,” she says, which isn’t helping at all.

But then she opens the door for real, and Mike finally gets a good look at the living room, and he stops thinking about monsters. He stops thinking about anything at all, mouth opening in shock at the sight in front of him – his brain sounds like static noise between his ears, like someone changed the radio station to nothing.

He knows it’s her the moment he sees her. Her hair is longer – her hair is long, period, falling around her shoulders – and darker than he would have thought. She can no longer be mistaken for a boy, too, her body more feminine, having grown into curves Mike pretends not to notice even if his eyes linger for a while, on her hips, on her breasts. Her cheekbones are sharper, too, but her eyes remain unchanged – big and brown and ageless, the eyes of someone who has seen too much, who has seen Hell and lived up to tell the tale.

“Mike,” she says, her voice a little deeper but still clipped, tentative.

Nancy gasps loudly behind him, but Mike ignores her. He can't look away from Eleven, even as he moves closer to her, not daring to blink in case she disappears during the quarter of second it takes him to close his eyes. But she doesn't disappear, still here, still solid and real and alive in front of him.

"You came back," is all he finds to say, his throat dry and his mind running.

"Promised," she replies with one of her rare, mysterious smiles. "For the Snow Ball."

Mike realises he's crying only when he tries to laugh and chokes on his own tears. Eleven looks distraught at the sight, but then he raises his hand to put it on her cheek, leaning toward her until their foreheads are touching. She closes her eyes and so does he, relishing in her presence, in the warmth of her body close to his. She smells like forest and decay, like she spent too much time in the Upside Down (six years! six fucking years!) but Mike doesn't care. All he cares about is that she's back, into their lives and by his side. He couldn't care less about everything else, right now.

"I missed you," he admits, low enough that only she can hear.

"Sorry. Still friends?"

"Yeah," he replies, even if the word feels hollow, not enough. Never enough. "Yeah, still friends."

She nods against his forehead. Mike isn't certain who starts it, but then they're hugging, Eleven's fingers gripping the back of his shirt like she never wants to let go, him holding on to her just as tightly. Her tears are hot against his neck, her body shivering against his – he wonders what happened, what she saw that finally managed to shaken her up that badly. Maybe he doesn't want to know. Maybe he does, just because telling him would help ease her mind.

It's another half an hour before the others manage to separate them long enough for Nancy to push Eleven toward the bathroom, fresh clothes under her arm, to help her clean up. The sound of the shower echoes down the hallway as Mrs Byers explains Mike and Jonathan

that she was minding her own business, waiting for Hopper to come back from patrol, when she heard noises in the shed. When she went to check, flashlight in one hand and hammer in the other, Eleven was just there, scared and panicking, wearing nothing but an old ratty shirt. Her first reaction was to give Eleven a sweater; her second reaction was to call Mike.

Her hair is still wet when she gets out of the bathroom and, idly, Mike thinks this is what will take the more time to get used to. Not the fact that she's back even if he saw her die, but her hair – long and pretty ('still pretty') and he wants to touch it, to run his fingers through it, and he wonders if it's normal, this puppy love turned long-time heart-breaking crush, turned something else entirely now that she's here again.

She fits herself against him, his arm wrapping around her shoulders out of an instinct coming from God knows where. Her cold nose against his neck, she sights happily, content. Nancy smirks at him, knowing, and Mike's answering glare feel inoffensive, forced. Especially when he pulls Eleven closer to him, her body fitting against his in way it has no right to be. He kisses the top of her head, and swears she purrs a little in reply.

She might be his undoing, but he was twelve when he learnt that the hard way.

He decides to call the other boys somewhat later, because they have a right to know too. Eleven still won't leave his side even as he grabs Mrs Byers' phone and dials Dustin's number. There's three tones before his mother replies, a few more moment before Dustin picks up.

"Susan," he says, the old codename coming back to him in an instant – the one they haven't used in years, because it was too painful, because Mike's eyes would be all wet and everyone would avoid everyone else's eyes. "Susan is back to Narnia."

Dustin cheers and whoops by the other side of the phone.

Mike only has eyes for Eleven's smile.

2. Chapter 2

Notes for the Chapter:

Lots of people have been asking for a sequel (thanks a lot about all the feedback, guys!) and this isn't as much a sequel as it is another oneshot set in the same verse. If that makes sense. It does, at least in my head.

Hopper comes home one night and just tells Joyce, "Congratulations, it's a girl," as he hands her a big kraft envelope. Eleven watches in silent curiosity as Joyce comes to sit next to her on the sofa before she opens the envelope. A bunch of papers falls out of it, most of them Eleven doesn't recognise. Joyce has been working on her reading with her, every night after dinner, but Eleven still struggles a little - she recognises the letters, and the sounds, but her lexicon is poor to say the least and makes things harder for her. They're working on it, with books that make her feel like a child rather than the almost-adult she's supposed to be.

Joyce hands her one of the papers, and it's not even a paper but plastic against her fingertips. It's an ID card, with her picture on it and, written in strict black letters, 'Elle Jane Byers'. (They told her where she comes from, or at least where they think she comes from. Everyone agrees it is safer if she keeps a low profile, though, and explained that her biological mother wouldn't recognise her anyway, in her state.) (It makes Eleven sad, but she tries her best to understand. She has a new family now.)

She's been barely going out ever since she came back from the Upside Down. Hopper was involved with the bad place, somehow, even though Eleven doesn't particularly understand how and why. She just knows the food was coming from him, and that he's now trying to keep her safe by keeping her inside. At least until everything is said and done, until they are sure that nothing can link her back to the pseudo-scientific facility - nothing but the ink on her forearm.

So she stays inside, waiting day after day until Joyce comes back from work, until Christmas finally is around the corner and bring her

friends back to her. Eleven understands they all had to move away from university, but it doesn't make the pain go away - she's alone in this too big house, with shadows that do nothing to soothe her mind. She's alone, more often than not, and lonely - she misses the boys' loud voices and their excitement over little things, she misses Nancy's soft smiles and Jonathan's awkward stares. She misses Mike, most of all. She always misses Mike.

Joyce does her best to compensate, though. She buys new clothes for Eleven, outfits that look a lot like what Nancy wears - what all women her age seem to wear, if the pictures on television are anything to go by. It makes her feel - different, somehow, like she's actually trying to fit in this time, to belong; like she's putting her past behind her, pretending she wasn't a lab rat in a war too big for her. It's easy, when she doesn't have to use her powers or fight for her life. It's easy when Joyce tells her about her day, when Mike calls to talk in the evening. Like she's a normal girl, with normal problems - like her bigger problem in life is to finish a book before Christmas, going slowly over the words and immersing herself in the story. Centaurs and talking beavers and mysterious lions, and four little kids brave and adventurous, thrown into a confusing world. She knows the feeling.

Jonathan is the first to come home for Christmas. One day it's only her and Joyce and Hopper, and the next day she wakes up to Jonathan in the kitchen, his hair messy and his smile easy. He's the one Eleven knows the least - the boys she has no problem with, and Nancy gets along with her if only because they're both girls. But Jonathan is a mystery to Eleven - she only knows he's a photographer in San Francisco now, if only because some of his works decorate the walls of the house. Black and white, and pretty.

"Good morning," he grins at her, looking up from the pans in front of him. Eggs and bacon are cooking, Eleven's mouth watering at the smell. "What do you want for breakfast?"

"Eggos," she replies softly, losing her words a little. She can make full sentences now, but it's as if her tongue is stuck to the roof of her mouth. "Please," she adds as an afterthought, not wanting to sound rude despite her awkwardness.

Jonathan raises an eyebrow, before he sighs. “Of course she’s feeding you that crap. Let’s make waffles. Real ones.”

And so Eleven watches as Jonathan makes waffles for her, warm and golden and fluffy. It smells heavenly, too, and he adds chocolate sauce to the mix, offering her a proud, small grin when she closes her eyes around a mouthful and hums happily. That’s when Joyce wakes up, padding her way toward the kitchen. She kisses the top of Eleven’s head, the way she does every morning, before she does the same with Jonathan’s cheek.

“Thanks for breakfast, darling.”

“Stop feeding her that crap,” is all he replies, his grin a little wider when his mother pushes him away. “How are you all surviving without me?”

“Take-away, for the most part,” Joyce replies with a wink toward Eleven, one that makes her grin. Jonathan only rolls his eyes, before filling a plate with waffles, eggs and bacon, and giving it to his mother. She takes it from him, as she adds, “Will arrives tonight, so we’re going to be short on beds.”

“I’ll go at Nance’s,” Jonathan replies easily, like he doesn’t have to think about the answer. Eleven wonders what it feels like - the same way she wonders when she sees Hopper kissing Joyce when he comes back home after a day of work, or how she hears them whispering to each other at night, when they think she’s asleep. She remembers a kiss, the press of dry lips against her surprised mouth, but never manages to link that to what she witnesses in others.

Joyce smirks a little, playing with Eleven’s hair, and the girls forces herself to think about something else. Like the tree they still need to decorate, and the gifts they need to wrap, the food they’ll cook for dinner. That’s foreign to her too, but Joyce has been patient with her - going to the shops and letting her choose gifts for the boys, and Nancy. Joyce had paid, too, but things will change soon enough - Hopper is letting Eleven work at the station next month, making coffee and all of that. It’s to keep busy, for the most part, but Eleven is grateful. A job, it’s another step toward normalcy.

A car parks in front of the house a little before five, and Eleven doesn't think much of it at first. It's just Will coming home, like Joyce said - Eleven never met him, but they share something now, they share the weight of spending too much time in the Upside Down. She doesn't know how to act around him, if she should say something or pretend the weight is hers alone.

But then Joyce opens the door and says, "El, it's for you," and Eleven perks up. She closes her book and leaves her room, only for her to stop in the middle of the hallway and gasps. That's all she can do at first, staring at Mike and not knowing how to react - she never knows how to react around him, not anymore.

At least, until he grins at her, all crooked smile and hair falling in his eyes. It's all Eleven needs to remember the kid he used to be, not the man he grew up to be. Same but different too. The man she hugged like her life depended on it, a few weeks back when she saw him again. She doesn't know where that came from - she's never been the hugging type, mostly because physically affection wasn't something she knew as a child. Touching meant hurting. But not with Mike, never with Mike. She likes the way she fits against him, even if she doesn't understand the pain in her stomach when it happens - something new, something she's never felt before.

Her body reacts before her mind does. Her feet move on their own accord, until she's standing in front of him, mirroring his grin. She's the one who initiates the hug this time, throwing her arms around his neck and pulling him to her. The air escapes his lungs in a breathless laugh as he hugs her back, arms around her waist, pulling her even closer. She fits against him all over again - he's taller than her now, but still skinny, solid and warm against her body. Comforting. Safe.

Jonathan coughs pointedly, startling the both of them away from each other. Eleven turns her head to glare at him, upset that he ruined their moment, but he only replies with an apologetic smile. He told her, earlier today, that she's a Byers now and that means she's his sister through and through. Eleven wonders if that's what he meant, that now he's allowed to be annoying just because he's older. She hates that. She loves that, too.

Mike sighs around a polite, "Hello, Mrs Byers," then turns to

Jonathan and adds, more coldly, "hi Jonathan." The older boy just grins a little more, before he shrugs and goes to lock himself in his room. Joyce shakes her head, a little exasperated, then pointedly finds something to do in another room, leaving them some (much needed) space.

Eleven turns back to Mike, eyes widening a little when she realises she has no idea what to do, what to say. Perhaps because she's never been good with talking, and he was always there to fill the silence, but now he is just as speechless as she is, staring at her in confusion too. What a pair they make.

But then he squares his shoulder when a sigh and a nod, like he's bracing himself for - his lips are on Eleven's before she has time to finish the thought. This isn't like their first kiss. Well, it is, still a little dry and a lot unexpected. But it isn't the kiss of a boy who doesn't know how to put words on things - it's the kiss of a boy who knows exactly what he means, what he does. Eleven wonders if he's kissed other girls. The thought upsets her.

It's quick, his mouth only lingering a little bit, before he leans away. Her eyes stay close a few seconds longer, the tip of her tongue darting out to her upper lip - the taste of him lingers for a little while longer. When she opens her eyes again, he's staring at her, anxious and hopeful. Eleven smiles.

"Was that okay?" he asks.

Her smile widens, and she nods. "More than okay."

3. Chapter 3

Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you all for the feedback! It means so much to me that you are appreciating my work!

Some Wheeler siblings feels for this part. Because reasons.

Mike finds himself at his desk after dinner, tinkering with the family toaster – his mom complains about it a lot, and it never hurts to check. Nancy's footsteps are light against the carpet when she enters his room and comes to sit on his bed. She's silent for long minutes, and Mike lets her be. Whatever she's come to say, she will say eventually. No more secrets, the childish promise still strong between them despite the years.

She finally settles on a little sigh, before she drops a simple “Johnny is going to propose” on him. Mike turns around in his chair, facing her and staring with widening eyes. “I found the ring last week,” she shrugs with a smile. “And he asked to talk to dad alone. He’s not really subtle.”

“Does Jonathan know you only call him ‘Johnny’ because of Dirty Dancing?” Mike asks, because it’s his job as a little brother to give Nancy shit whenever he can. She throws a pillow at him, but it’s a half-hearted throw and it falls a few feet away from him in a soft ‘thud’. Mike grins. “I’m happy for you, Nance.”

She smiles back, softly. “Thank you.” She drops her eyes a little, the way she always does to look cute and innocent. Works on boys. Definitely doesn’t work on brothers, especially when she looks up a few seconds later, biting down on her lip around a smirk. “So...”

“Please, don’t.”

He turns around and focuses back on the toaster, ignoring her playful laugh. She gives as much as she gets now, no longer bothering to look like the perfect little suburban girl everyone wanted her to be.

That's what San Francisco does to a person, apparently, not that Mike can complain – he likes that version of his sister way better. Unless she uses it to tease him, of course.

"What was it again?" she asks, before adding in a poor rendition of his voice, "Oh ew, no, gross?"

"I was twelve," Mike defends himself, without heat. "And you told me you and Jonathan were 'just friends'."

"We were!" she shots back, before pausing. Mike looks at her above his shoulder, unimpressed. "Okay, point taken. Still..."

He knows what she means. He knows what they all mean when they look at him with sad, sad eyes and try to hide their pity from him. Mike Wheeler, the kid who never grew into a healthy romantic life because he was too busy pining on a girl that might as well be dead. He always refused to think about Eleven like that but – he couldn't get a girlfriend, couldn't even force himself to just go on a date and try. It didn't make sense to him.

And now Eleven is back, in Hawkins and in his life, and he doesn't know what to do. Doesn't know what to feel when she hugs him and when he kisses her (his first kiss since he was twelve) and doesn't know what to feel when he remembers he's only here for Christmas break and will be back on campus in a few weeks. He will leave her behind, not completely forgotten but still behind and – he can't just run head first into something that will be put on pause until summer break.

This isn't fair for any of them, least of all her.

"Oh Mike," Nancy sighs when he stays silent for a while longer.

She stretches her hand toward him, fingers brushing against the sleeve of his sweater, before he stands up and comes to sit next to her on the bed. He lets himself fall backward, pressing the palms of his hands to his eyes until he sees stars, blight and white. It doesn't help at all.

"I thought I was done with Hawkins, you know," he starts, knows

he's going to ramble but doesn't even stop himself. "I mean, it was the goal, right? Just – leaving Hawkins behind, blank page and all. You did it. Jonathan did it and – you guys make it seem so easy. No government conspiracy, no monsters... No Mirkwood..."

"But she's back," Nancy finishes for him. She lies by his side, staring up at the Mad Max poster Dustin stubbornly managed to put there one summer.

"But she's back," Mike echoes. "And I can't leave her behind. But I can't just..."

He doesn't finish his sentence, lets it linger in the silence between them. He can't just ask her to follow him, not when he shares a small dorm room with Dustin, not when she's doing so well with Hopper and Mrs Byers. Mike can't be that selfish, especially when Eleven is already so skittish as it is – put her in the outside world, and she would just combust from anxieties, or kill everyone. Maybe even both.

"We didn't leave it behind." Mike turns his head toward Nancy, raises and eyebrow. "Johnny – Jonathan and I, we didn't leave it all behind. Why do you think I'm studying mythology and urban legends? And Jonathan, he takes those weird pictures and – the nightmares, they don't go away. You can't leave it behind when it won't stop following you." She grabs his hand, squeezes a little. "And seriously, little brother, you still have time to decide before you settle in the Silicon Valley with your childhood sweetheart."

There's a teasing edge to her voice, but it just makes Mike smile because it's fond too. His cheeks are a little warmer than he would like, thinking *childhood sweetheart*. Because Eleven is just that, but so much more too. It scares him, thinking about it, not being able to put words on his feelings. Will is the one who's good with words, not him. Never him.

"When did you become so clever?" is what he settles on, mocking.

Nancy gasps, overly dramatic in her reaction, before she pushes him away with a laugh. He pushes back. It only takes a few seconds for them to start a stupid little fight – they don't mean to hurt, unlike

when they were children and he would pull her hair or she would kick him in the shin. It's just playful, and fun, and that's how Jonathan finds them as he leans against the doorframe, arms crossed on his chest.

He coughs pointedly, startling them both.

Nancy grins, tugging a loose strand of hair behind her ear, her smile widening when Jonathan replies in kind. Mike rolls his eyes, to make a statement. She also fixes her skirt when she stands up, then her sweater, before she turns back to Mike.

“Life isn’t one of your campaigns,” she tells him. “It takes more than ten hours of roleplay to get where you need to go.”

“You’re seriously paying Berkeley to feed you that crap?”

She makes a face at him before she grabs Jonathan’s hand and leaves the room, leaving Mike alone with his sarcasm and his thoughts. He falls back on the bed with a sigh, and closes his eyes, only to picture Eleven behind his closed lids.

Stupid feelings.